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U.S. Warns of New Bombing If Libya Resumes Terrorism

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SANTA BARBARA, Calif., Aug. 25—The Reagan administration has warned Libya that it is prepared to take direct military action, including bombing raids, if Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi resumes his terrorist campaign, administration officials said today.

"We are prepared to strike directly against Libya, if necessary," a senior official said. The official also confirmed essential details of a Wall Street Journal report today that described U.S. military planning and covert action against Libya.

An official in Washington said, however, that the main purpose of U.S. activities is "to warn elements of the Libyan leadership that their country will pay a price if Gadhafi engages in new episodes of adventurism."

The administration has also decided to dispatch U.N. Ambassador Vernon Walters on a tour of Western European capitals next week in an effort to increase economic and political pressures on Libya, according to State Department officials. Previous discussions of measures to be taken against Gadhafi were held at the Tokyo economic summit and in trips to European capitals by Deputy Secretary of State John C. Whitehead and other officials.

Some administration officials said it has been explicit U.S. policy since the U.S. bombing raid against Libya April 15 that further terrorist acts by Gadhafi will bring a U.S. response. In this sense, the new warning to Gadhafi reiterates an old policy rather than stating a new one.

The senior official said Gadhafi, who may have been injured when U.S. bombs struck his compound in the April raid, is "mentally unstable" and apparently planning new attacks on U.S. targets in Europe and the Middle East.

Without directly confirming it, White House spokesman Larry Speakes alluded to a U.S. strategy of encouraging internal Libyan opposition by telling reporters today that Gadhafi has "internal problems."

U.S. military leaders took a less alarmist view than White House officials about Gadhafi allegedly planning new terrorist activity.

"Somebody seems to be whipping things up," one military source said.

"There's a disinformation campaign under way," said another source in asserting that some of the tough talk is designed not only to scare Gadhafi into inactivity on the terrorist front but also to encourage his Libyan opponents, particular military professionals, to topple him.

French intelligence officials are reporting that a coup against Gadhafi is possible soon, U.S. sources said.

The Soviets, who have provided Libya with antiaircraft missiles and other military equipment, have been informed through diplomatic channels of U.S. intentions, according to high-level administration sources.

As of today, Libyan forces had made no attempt to respond as the aircraft carrier USS Forrestal and two escorting warships passed Libya on the way to waters off Egypt to conduct joint military exercises with the Egyptian air force, Defense Department officials said.

The only visible military response over the weekend, they said, were flights from Tripoli by Soviet antisubmarine aircraft near the Forrestal battle group to track movements and flight activities.

The group conducted flight operations while passing through the Tripoli Flight Information Region (FIR) but was not challenged or studied by Libyan planes, officials said. All Libyan submarines were reported in port, except for one in Yugoslavia.

Officials said three other aircraft carriers are within days of Libya.

Speakes said today that the administration is prepared to respond to any new incidents of Libyan terrorism.

"We do watch Gadhafi's activities very, very closely, and we're keeping a close eye on what Gadhafi is doing and what he may be planning," Speakes said. "Our policy toward Libyan-backed terrorism is unequivocal and unchanged. We will employ all appropriate means to cause Libya to cease its terrorist policies."

Speakes, who declined to comment on Gadhafi's condition or state of mind, said the Libyans retain a "capability" for terrorist actions.

Another senior official said the United States, working with European allies, has foiled Libyan plans for other terrorist attacks since the bombing raid.

President Reagan justified the bombing, which destroyed part of Gadhafi's headquarters, as retaliation for the terrorist bombing 11 days earlier of a West Berlin discotheque frequented by U.S. troops. Reagan said then that the United States also had evidence that Libya was planning other, similar attacks.

Administration sources also said recent terrorist plots uncovered in Berlin and Africa have not been tied convincingly to Libya and thus could not compare with the discotheque attack, which resulted in the deaths of two U.S. soldiers and a Turkish woman, as justification for U.S. military action.

The senior administration official, who agreed to discuss the Wall Street Journal article on condition that he not be identified, said there is "no question" that Gadhafi is planning other terrorist operations.

Without being specific, the official said others in the Libyan military "appear to be more prudent" than Gadhafi and less inclined to risk U.S. retaliation.

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Speakes said current U.S.-Egyptian exercises, code-named "Sea Wind," had been planned for months and are "unrelated to recent developments."

But other officials said they are part of a larger plan designed to intimidate Gadhafi and are not being described as such because of Egyptian diplomatic sensitivities.

Part of this larger plan may involve continued support for neighboring Chad, which is backed by

France. Speakes said Gadhafi "is actively seeking to overthrow the Chadian government, and we have been cooperating with Chad and strengthening its armed forces."

The Wall Street Journal said the United States is contemplating possible joint action with France to drive Libyan troops out of Chad.

Speakes also said the United States, while prepared to act alone, "will be discussing with our allies the possibilities of further high-level consultations" to combat Libyan-sponsored terrorism.

Administration sources who discussed the latest U.S. pressure against Libya said that dissent is increasing inside that nation and that the United States is trying to encourage this by covert means, which they did not detail.

They said Libya has issued ammunition to only a limited number of elite troops, forestalling likelihood of a direct military revolt.

"Despite his wounds and his aberrations, Gadhafi still seems to be in control," one official said.

These sources acknowledged that U.S. intelligence-gathering capabilities in Libya have been complicated because Gadhafi is taking countermeasures to prevent the electronic intercepts of communications. Reagan, to the dismay of some government intelligence officials, disclosed that such intercepts had been made last April.

Staff writers Don Oberdorfer and George C. Wilson in Washington contributed to this report.